

A New Mission on the Bowery

The New Museum, pioneer of the avant-garde, relocates to elegant new headquarters on the Lower East Side

Lisa Phillips recalls that when the New Museum of Contemporary Art moved in 1983 from its original site in Greenwich Village to a loft building on Broadway near Houston Street, that part of SoHo was in the early stages of becoming one of New York's hottest art gallery destinations. "We helped to transform that street," says Phillips, who has been director of the New Museum for nearly a decade. Now, with its relocation to a new, \$50 million building in the city's famously derelict Bowery neighborhood, the institution looks poised to repeat that success. "We wanted to do what we had done in SoHo," Phillips says. "The Bowery seemed to be languishing and ignored—by everyone except artists—who always know what's going on, of course."

With just a few finishing touches needed before it opens at the beginning of next month, the New Museum already makes a dramatic statement. Twice as tall as its neighbors, the 60,000-square-foot structure is composed of six glittering, aluminum-mesh-clad boxes piled in an offset stack over a glass-enclosed lobby. The new building, designed by Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa of the Tokyo-based architectural firm Sanaa, will have no other tenants, a first in the history of the institution. Established by Marcia Tucker in 1977 after she was fired from a curatorial post at the Whitney Museum of American Art—following critical pans of a Richard Tuttle show she had organized—the New Museum was originally based on the campus of the city's New School. Dedicated exclusively to contemporary art, the noncollecting institution provided an important forum for such artists as John Baldessari and Elizabeth Murray at a time when there were few opportunities for them to exhibit works in noncommercial

spaces. The New Museum left the New School to become a tenant in the Broadway building, then sold that space in 2002 and took up temporary residence in the Chelsea Art Museum while the new site was being built; it suspended its programming last May.

Phillips, who became the New Museum's director when Tucker stepped down in 1999, recognizes that the field of contemporary art has expanded significantly since the institution's founding. A veteran curator who also came to the New Museum from the Whitney, Phillips, 50, was born in New York and earned a B.A. in art history from Middlebury College in Vermont in 1975 and her doctorate from the City College of New York in 1980. Joining the Whitney in 1977, Phillips oversaw such contemporary-art shows as the 1997 biennial, which she organized with curator and critic Louise Neri, and retrospectives of Cindy Sherman in 1987 and Richard Prince and Terry Winters in 1992. She emphasizes that the New Museum continues to carry out Tucker's aims of encouraging living artists and displaying their efforts. "We very much believe in helping to produce works of art," she says. "That idea of an institution as producer—that's something we're still very committed to, mak-

ing new works happen."

Over time the museum has amassed a modest collection, mostly based on donations. For instance, in 2001 the Altoids mint company gave its contemporary-art holdings—with works by artists such as Laylah Ali, Steve DeFrank, and Barry McGee, and announced that it would donate future purchases as well. But Phillips says the museum will continue to operate without a formal acquisitions program. "The care and feeding



The New Museum's building, designed by the Tokyo-based architectural firm Sanaa, is an offset stack of six aluminum-mesh-clad boxes over a glass-enclosed lobby.